

ALLEGED BREEDING OCCURRENCE OF THE LE
CONTE SPARROW IN ILLINOIS.

BY P. B. PEABODY.

An article dealing with the alleged breeding of the Le Conte Sparrow, near Chicago, published by G. A. Abbott in the Wilson Bulletin No. 74, is a conspicuous example of the unwisdom of snap-shot identifications. In the first place, the A. O. U. Check List of 1910 does not accredit the LeConte Sparrow as breeding south of Southern Minnesota; (while even *this* record appears to rest, as believed by some of us who have studied birds critically in Southern Minnesota, upon wholly inadequate indentifications.) In the second place, Mr. Abbott naively throws a shadow over his own identifications by admitting that he "neglects small birds in his zeal to follow and study the water fowl." In the third place, the location where Mr. Abbott's alleged LeConte Sparrows attempted to rear their young is, while sharply characteristic of the Henslow Sparrow, (as well in Kansas as Ohio), exactly the sort of location wherein the LeConte Sparrow never, so far as past discoveries go, is known to nest. The site, also, in a "little clump of coarse grass" is utterly alien to the LeConte habit. Therefore, when Mr. Abbott expressly tells us that he "did not catch a glimpse of" the male parent which lured him on by its ventriloquism while the female flushed at ten feet; and dropped, after short flight, into cover, how can he expect the critical world of bird students to accredit his find of a "neat little nest," with their five eggs "showing a distinct individuality," to a species not known to nest anywhere in the region in question? The writer having taken more sets of eggs of the LeConte Sparrow than any other ornithologist, living or dead, and being intimately and critically familiar with the nesting habits and conditions of this exceedingly furtive species, he may be pardoned in speaking dogmatically concerning Mr. Abbott's manifestly delicious but palpably futile find. One must confess that the nest, as described by Mr. Abbott, is strik-

ingly le-conte-nest-like. One might say more were that nest in hand. As to the eggs, however, one must enter a prompt *non sequitur*. There is no "distinct individuality" about the eggs of the LeConte Sparrow. Moreover, I have yet to see an egg of this species bearing bright, or half-bright, colorations. (Grays, lilacs and dull-browns normally prevail.) And the "ashy-grey" ground is not in the least diagnostic; indeed, I do not recall ever having seen a set, or an egg, of the Le Conte Sparrow having such a ground-color. The writer has one set in which the ground color is probably bluish; as, in at least a faint degree, are a possible majority of eggs of this species. The set above referred-to quite strikingly resembles certain types of eggs of the Swamp Sparrow; save that the blotchings are exceedingly obscure; with an effect that might almost be called a marbling. At the antipodes of this set is one which is of a clear, pale blue-green, with tiny spots over the entire surface. But neither of these sets is typical. The bulk of typical eggs of the LeConte Sparrow have, with the decided bluish-white or bluish-grey brown tint, a tendency rather to spotting than to either blotching or to stippling. Mr. Abbott's Henslow-Sparrow-find conforms, in every detail, (excepting, possibly, in the brighter ground-tint of the eggs), to like conditions by me in Kansas.

When will we all of us learn that there is nothing diagnostic as a rule, in the matter of mere *shapes*, with eggs of any and all Sparrows? Some of my series of eggs of the LeConte Sparrow are fairly subpyriform; many are ovate; and some almost oval. But there is no specific *shape*. The LeConte Sparrow never provably nests on upland rolling ground. And it never nests in isolated grass-clumps. The locations are uniformly, so far as I have observed, in wet, willow-studded upland meadows; wherein are perfect wildernesses of prone dead grass. I never found but one nest in any other sort of cover, that one having been ensconced, (in just such a meadow as I have cited), on a slight bog out of which grew a thistle, in the midst of living and dead grasses. (This nest had the added idiosyncrasy of being at the highest elevation in my experience,

about twelve inches, or more.) As Mr. Abbott infers, the nest of the LeConte Sparrow is (probably) never on the ground. It is immeasurably unfortunate that Mr. Abbott did not secure one of the parents of the eggs he has described, or that he did not make minute notes as to the character of the call of this fugitive little LeConte Sparrow. If he will kindly attempt this, in the pages of the Bulletin, he will possibly be doing distributional ornithological science a distinct favor; since, in point of fact, there is no other American sparrow whose song note is in any remotest sense like that of *A. lecontei*: (which is uttered, with pre-eminent distinctness and frequency, at nightfall.) The flight ascribed by Mr. Abbott to the parent bird he flushed on his stream-bordering side-hill might mislead careful observers who certainly desire to know just how a flushed Le Conte Sparrow flies from her nest. In very truth, she flies, sometimes one way, sometimes another, according to her individual temperament. At times a flushed mother of this species will fly slowly from her nest. Seldom, indeed, will she "dart slowly": (how *could* she)? The flight of the LeConte, from her nest is usually direct, poised, sometimes slow; but never "feeble." Moreover, I never yet made the acquaintance of a Le Conte Sparrow that would flush from the grass nearer than ten feet to her nest. She creeps, mouse-like, from her nest, at the faintest alarm; flushing, then only at some distance, exactly as does a bobolink. This is a practically invariable fact; (though nobody would be readier than I to accept statement as to one, two or three instances to the contrary. We have yet to learn, many of us, that there are few universal laws governing, intra-specifically, any unit of bird-behavior.) For the possible edification of such students of sparrow ways as have never had the good fortune to study the LeConte and the Nelson Sparrows in their nesting-environment, one might add a few items to this paper-of-protest.

Le Conte is a sparrow of the upland meadows; *Nelson's*, of the lowlands. The nests and the eggs of the two, unlike as are the habits, calls and nuptial songs of these two "cousins," are practically identical: especially the nests. The eggs of Nelson

Sparrows that I have seen conform to the paler type of Le Conte eggs. The nest sites and placings are precisely the same.

In manner at nest, I am inclined to believe, (from *very* narrow experience,) that these two sparrows are totally unlike in their reactions. In searching for nests of the Le Conte Sparrow you make your circuits with your drag-rope; and when a bird flushes, you drop the rope quickly, and begin to search about five feet back of where you think the bird left the sea-of-grass. Find it you surely will — if it be there; which it more than likely will be. *Per contra*, when you hear the harsh “crz-z-z-h” of a soaring Nelson Sparrow, you just drop the nail-rake with which you have been dragging-up the dead grass in your search for that nest of the Yellow Rail; and begin to paw grass by the acre. Maybe you will find a nest of Nelson Sparrow, *sometime*; but flush a sitting bird you almost never will. Many a bird will leave the grass before your very feet; and you will paw grass with renewed ferocity. But you will always have just your pawing for your pains. (In other words, I am inclined to believe that the Nelson Sparrow always leaves her nest before an intruder is anywhere near; and that she never leaves the cover until very far away.) Now, will Mr. Abbott be complaisant enough to describe for us, in the pages of the *Wilson Bulletin*, the call of his “ventriloquistic” little friend; and will he send the nest of his finding to some critical student for inspection and verification?

A WINTER INVASION OF JASPER COUNTY, IOWA.

BY J. L. SLOANAKER.¹

Seeing the following paragraph in an early December issue¹ of the *Newton Journal*, I immediately took steps to ascertain the correctness of the report, which read as follows:

PRAIRIE CHICKENS ARE PLENTIFUL ON SKUNK BOTTOM.

“This year has brought along with its other innumerable blessings, a vast number of prairie chickens, such as¹ has not